



HELGA KUENZEL

rembrandt



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REMBRANDT

Translated from the German by
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Front Cover Illustration:

HENDRICKJE STOFFELS. Detail. 1648
National Gallery, Edinburgh

Back Cover Illustration:

THE COUNCILLORS OF THE CLOTHWORKERS GUILD
Oil. 1662. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

R E M B R A N D T

The life of a painter in Holland in the early seventeenth century was in many ways harder than that of his contemporaries in the rest of Europe. Until 1581 the country was under Spanish rule, and there was therefore no court nor any tradition of court painters, and the Protestant church with its insistence on modest decoration for churches and public buildings had few commissions to offer. In Northern Holland the painter was regarded as little better than a tradesman trying to interest customers in his wares. His clients came in fact from the industrious and energetic middle-class which was to make the seventeenth century the "golden century" for Holland, and who demanded paintings of themselves, their wealth and their country.

The demand was therefore restricted to portraits, group pictures, interiors and landscapes. Most painters specialized in one of these fields, which was something quite new in the history of art. There was one painter, however, who ignored all specialization by subject and whose many-sided genius had a lasting effect on his artistic compatriots — Rembrandt.

Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn was born on 15th July, 1606, in Leyden, the last but one of the six children of a miller. His father owned part of a mill on a branch of the Rhine, hence the family name "van Rijn". This industrious man and his wife, a baker's daughter, had made a good living out of the mill. Rembrandt's two older brothers had already learned a respectable trade and his parents could therefore afford to fulfil their dearest wish and send their talented fifth child to the Latin school, where he should have studied to become a teacher. After seven years of classical education Rembrandt entered the University of Leyden in May, 1620.

Scholarship could not hold the young Rembrandt, however, for he earnestly longed to express himself through shape and colour in painting. His parents were understanding enough to let him leave the university, probably in the same year, and enter the studio of Jakob van Swanenburgh, where he remained for three years. Little is known about this painter — only that





HEAD OF REMBRANDT. Engraving
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

CHRIST AT EMMAUS. Paper on Wood. c. 1629
André Jaquemart Museum, Paris

REMBRANDT'S
MOTHER
Oil on Wood
1631
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam





PORTRAIT
OF HIS FATHER
Oil on Wood
c. 1629
Mauritshuis
Museum
The Hague



DOCTOR TULP'S ANATOMY LESSON. Oil, 1632
Mauritshuis Museum, The Hague

he had lived for twelve years, from 1605-17, in Naples and had an Italian wife. After his basic studies with van Swanenburgh, Rembrandt spent six months in Amsterdam with the well-known Pieter Lastman, to give a final polish to his artistic schooling. Lastman, who had also worked in Italy, introduced Rembrandt to the artistic heritage of the German painter Adam Elsheimer, who died in Rome in 1610.

Thanks to these two teachers Rembrandt, who never visited Italy and probably never even left Holland, became well acquainted with Italian painting. He felt a strong affinity with it, but a journey to the south, the well-beaten path to the Mecca of art, did not attract him; he wanted to find his own way. He returned to Leyden at the age of 19 and turned eagerly to the work which satisfied him so well that he was wholly indifferent to the usual pleasures of youth.

In his early period in Leyden (1625-31) Rembrandt principally painted people, individually or in groups, above all in Biblical scenes, but also in countless portraits which were more studies in expression than strict likenesses, because of his strenuous effort towards truth and the portrayal of character. These first paintings, which were already technical masterpieces, still showed the influence of Lastman and through him of Italy, for instance in the sharp contrast of light and shade which recalls Caravaggio.

Rembrandt maintained his connections with Mediterranean art throughout his life, repeatedly coming to terms with the great Italian masters. For instance he copied as a drawing Raphael's portrait of Count Castiglione, or Leonardo's *Last Supper*, though his treatment was realistic and dramatic, without Italianate idealization.

In 1631, one year after his father's death, Rembrandt moved to Amsterdam. Already acknowledged and esteemed in his hometown, he was attracted by the challenge of proving his skill in this growing centre of world commerce. Perhaps he wanted to rival Rubens, who was then enjoying great success and a large household in the Flemish town of Antwerp. His first obstacle was the presence of the established masters, whom he challenged successfully through his amazing technical skill. In 1632 he was honoured with a commission to paint a group picture of Dr. Tulp and his audience at an anatomy lecture. In the nearby town of Haarlem was working Frans Hals, the great master of this genre. Wanting also to establish himself in the face of this artist, Rembrandt chose a new type of composition, giving tension to his subject by concentrating interest on the anatomical construction and light on the object of the demonstration, that is, the body. Rembrandt's model, an Amsterdam surgeon, was very satisfied with the picture.



TALL BEGGAR
STANDING
Engraving
1629
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam



▷
RETURN OF
THE PRODIGAL SON
Engraving
1636
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam





SASKIA THREE DAYS AFTER THEIR ENGAGEMENT. Detail. Drawing. 1633

Rembrandt soon became a much sought after portrait-painter, and countless commissions opened to him the doors of the best houses. In 1634 he married Saskia van Uylenburgh, the wealthy, orphaned daughter of a legal scholar, and therewith began the happiest years of his

SUSANNAH
AND THE ELDERS
Detail
Oil on Wood
1647
Museum of Art
Berlin



THE BLINDING OF SAMSON. Oil on Canvas. 1636
City Art Institute, Frankfurt





THE NIGHTWATCH
PARADE OF CAPTAIN FRANS BANNINCK COCQ'S COMPANY
Oil on Canvas. 1642. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

PORTRAIT
OF AN ORIENTAL
1635
Duke of
Devonshire's
Collection
England





HOLY FAMILY
WITH ANGELS
Oil on Canvas. 1645
Hermitage Museum
Leningrad



MAN IN
GOLD HELMET
Oil on Canvas
c. 1652
National Museum
Berlin



MARS (ALEXANDER
THE GREAT)
Oil on Canvas, 1655
Municipal
Art Collection
Glasgow



THE STORM. Oil on Wood. c. 1638
Prince Anton-Ulrich Museum, Brunswick

life. He repeatedly painted, drew and etched his wife, who though not a beauty was an attractive young woman, as bride, as Danae, as Flora, on a sickbed, with her son, in full panoply and in many other disguises.

Increasing prosperity made it possible for Rembrandt to indulge his passion for collecting. He assembled a nature cabinet of mussels, corals, sea-fauna, minerals and suchlike, weapons of all countries and periods, valuable brocades, dishes, furniture, pearls and precious stones and bought, among others, paintings by Titian, Raphael, Giorgione, van Eyck and A. Brouwer, sketches by Dürer, Holbein, Schongauer and Mantegna as well as original sculptures and casts. His artistic imagination was constantly fired by these beautiful possessions, which furnished him with renewed inspiration.

In 1639 Rembrandt bought a splendid house in the Breestraat, and paid its running expenses out of his portrait commissions. His next interest was in religious history; the Bible was an inexhaustible fund of subject-matter for paintings throughout his life. In 1635 landscape began to feature in his paintings, etchings and drawings, no longer as pure background but on its own merits.

Numerous students now flocked to Rembrandt's studio, but in fact the painter had been taking pupils since he was 20 and must have been an outstandingly good teacher, because he knew how to develop the individual talents of each student without oppressing or stifling him with his own genius. Through his studio went the notable portrait-painter Jacob Adriansz Bac-ker, Ferdinand Bol the greatest of his pupils, Gerbrand van den Eeckhout his favourite, the mysterious Carel Fabritius and his brother Barent, the skilful imitator Govert Flinck, Samuel van Hoogstraten who was also well-known as a writer on art and many other, less important artists. They all enthusiastically followed Rembrandt's experiments with light effects, the so-called chiaroscuro which first appeared in painting in about 1600. Through the juxtaposition of soft, half-dark tones and patches of vivid light he succeeded in achieving a stronger intensity which is difficult to describe in words but easy to comprehend with the senses.

Around 1640 Rembrandt showed a definite swing from visible to spiritual values in his art, which lost some of its representative, provocative and tempestuous qualities and gained composure and depth through his gradually growing calm. Even his colours were changing — the gay, rustic tones yielded gradually to warm greys, reds and browns, contrasting with cool greens and cold blues.

This transformation in Rembrandt's style seems like a premonition of the events which were to strike most deeply in his life. His mother, to whom he had been deeply attached,

died in 1640, and in September of the following year Saskia at last gave him the child for which he had longed (their three earlier children had all died), but this fourth birth drained her of her remaining strength. She had already been ailing for some time and on the 14th July, 1642, the day before Rembrandt's 36th birthday, she died. His life of untroubled, carefree gaiety was over. In 1643 he completed a tender, sensitive portrait of his beloved wife as a last farewell.

In the year Saskia died Rembrandt painted his second big group picture — *The Nightwatch*. This was intended to be a socalled "Guard-Picture" and carried this name through an error. It was so novel in conception that it led to Rembrandt's first brush with public opinion. Commissioned for the Clovenier Guard Guildhouse, it depicted Captain Franz Banning Cocq marching out with his men in a scene of wild tumult. The strong movement and tension in its composition came into conflict with the outlook of the Dutch burghers — their modesty and their sense of reality. Besides this, Rembrandt had not only painted the sixteen members of the guard but several other characters as well. His principals angrily rejected the picture and recommissioned it from another artist.

Thus at a time when Rembrandt was suffering the deep personal loss of his wife, he also had to contend with a crisis in his artistic career. Those around him thought they had suddenly realized that he was creating a new universe which would make him partly sinister, partly ridiculous in the eyes of the world. People began to avoid him, and his studio was not frequented as much as before.

The fact that Rembrandt with his personal and artistic wounds tended to withdraw into himself, may well have contributed to this. Landscapes now assumed more importance in his work, and he immortalized the region around Amsterdam in etchings and drawings, though never in exact replica, for he still concentrated on light effects. In the nursery of his son Titus or in his studio he painted calm, restrained and obviously personal pictures. He was to be seen fighting his way through the Amsterdam ghetto and the poorer quarters of the town, for it was there that he found genuine humanity. He was fascinated with the ragged, sick figures because of their pride and dignity in suffering.

His paintings of this period heralded his later style. The colours were slowly becoming deeper and warmer and his typical brownish-red began to feature more prominently. His characteristic style became more grandiose and the light which vitalized his pictures soon ceased to fall from without on his figures but seemed to glow from within them.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which finally acknowledged the independence of Holland



STUDY
OF HEADS
SASKIA
IN CENTRE
Drawing, 1636
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam

NEGRO COMMANDER
AND DRUMMER
ON HORSEBACK
Drawing. 1638

△



PORTRAIT OF JEAN SIX
Oil on Canvas. 1654
Six Collection
Amsterdam

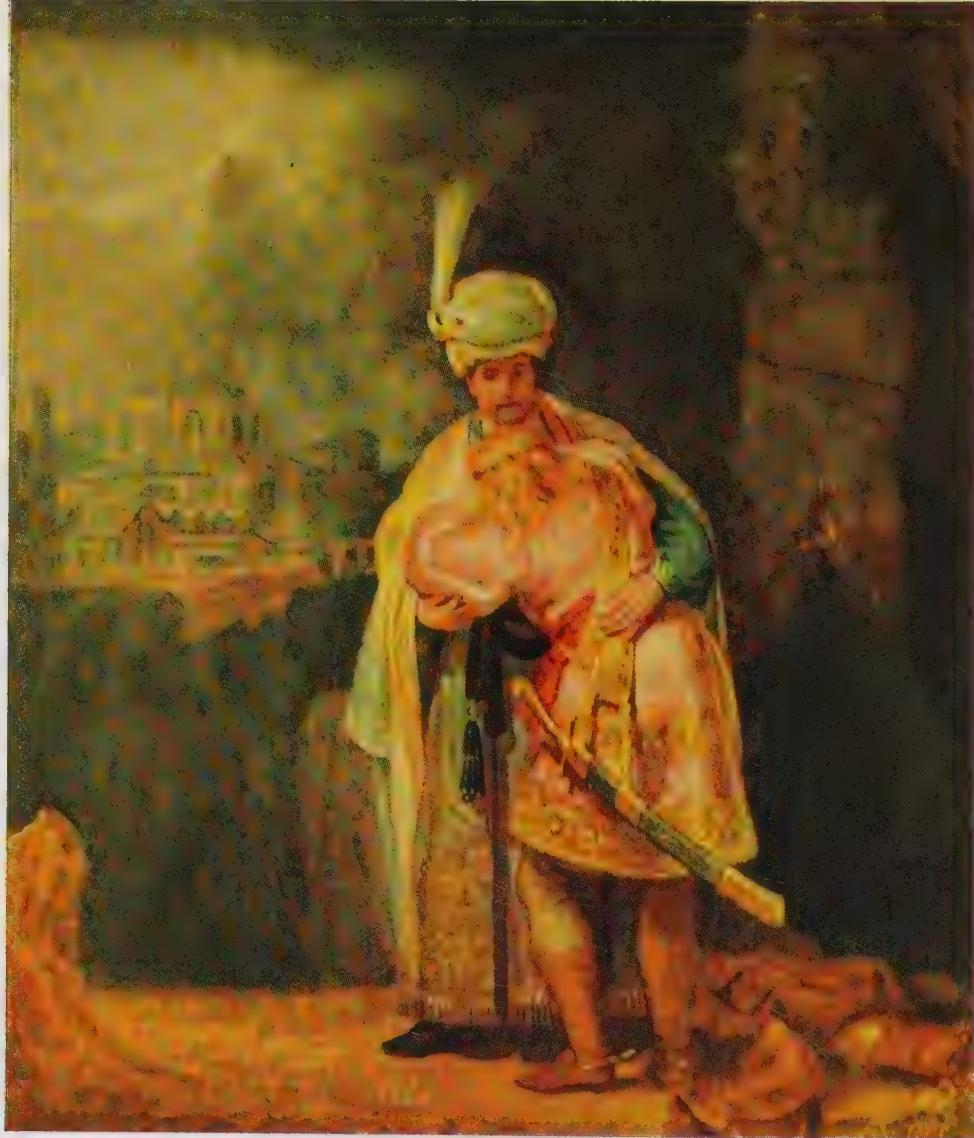




PORTRAIT
OF TITUS
THE ARTIST'S SON
Oil on Canvas
c. 1660
Art Museum
Vienna



▷
YOUNG GIRL
AT THE WINDOW
Oil on Canvas
1651
National Museum
Stockholm



THE FAREWELL
OF DAVID
AND JONATHAN
Oil on Wood
1642
Hermitage
Museum
Leningrad

did not seem to affect him greatly as an artist. He painted one single allegorical work on this subject.

In 1650 the face of a gracious-looking young woman with soulful dark eyes began to feature frequently in Rembrandt's paintings. She was Hendrickje Stoffels, an orphan who had entered the artist's household a few years before as a maid. With little Titus she took the place of a mother after Rembrandt had quarrelled with the boy's nurse, a battleaxe of a widow called Geerthge Dircx. This hard, dour woman who had obviously hoped to follow in Saskia's footsteps, received a settlement from Rembrandt and ended her life in an institution.

Hendrickje's deeply maternal nature undoubtedly contributed essentially to the artist's maturation. He made some wonderful paintings, drawings and etchings of her, and her devotion and fidelity to him never wavered, in spite of many outward unpleasantnesses. Although he certainly loved her, Rembrandt could not marry her, because a condition in Saskia's will deprived him in case of remarriage of the enjoyment of her fortune, which would have passed on to Titus. In 1652 Hendrickje bore a child which did not live long. Two years later came a daughter, Cornelia. Hendrickje was called before the church committee to be reprimanded for her liaison with Rembrandt, was fined and debarred from receiving Holy Communion. In the course of time however people grew accustomed to their union, and in the records of a law-suit in which Hendrickje appeared as a witness, she was described as Rembrandt's wife.

The increasing chaos in Rembrandt's financial affairs after Saskia's death ended in signed bonds and restraint on his property. In 1656 a composition with his creditors became unavoidable, and in the following year the first auction of his artistic possessions took place, followed shortly after by two others. As the creditors could not be satisfied, Rembrandt was also forced to sell his house, and moved with Hendrickje and the two children to the Rosengracht. He blamed his financial ruin on his commercial losses, but the true cause was probably his passion for collecting and his lack of business acumen.

To ensure for him the necessary freedom to paint and to protect him from his creditors Hendrickje, together with the seventeen-year-old Titus, started in business as art-dealers. The firm retained Rembrandt as "advisor", giving him board and lodging in return for handling all his new works. Thank to Hendrickje's cleverness and unselfishness, Rembrandt was spared any worse misadventure, and gained some peace. His painting was not too deeply affected by these external happenings and his financial downfall, so that one should not, as is often done, describe this period of his life as "tragic". In these very years appeared some wonderful works, including intimate, tender pictures of Hendrickje and Titus, who also served as models for many



DEATH APPEARS
TO A BRIDE
AND BRIDEGROOM
Engraving
1639

of his delicately coloured Biblical scenes. Rembrandt also immortalized some of his few true friends, among them Mayor Jan Six, in strongly expressive portraits.

Besides his paintings, the artist made some masterly etchings, in which he achieved the strongest effects through the greatest simplification. In the last decade of his life, however, he hardly used this technique any more.

A quantity of drawings and studies, some light, casual sketches, others bold and deliberate, supplemented his painted and engraved work and showed even more clearly than the latter his rich artistic imagination. Through his very sparing and simple, yet highly skilled, technique, together with the versatility and great power of expression of these works, Rembrandt ranked as the foremost painter in Europe after Dürer.

To the year 1655 belong Rembrandt's only book illustrations — six pictures for a work entitled *Piedra Gloriosa* by his friend Menasch ben Israel, a Jewish scholar and the teacher of Spinoza.

As in the two previous decades, Rembrandt painted one great group picture in the 1650s — *The Anatomy of Dr. Deyman*. This work, of which only a part remains, including the body and the doctor's assistant, is rigidly composed and assembled, and completely intensified. The majesty of death seems to triumph over the urge for scientific knowledge.

Humanity now became Rembrandt's exclusive artistic subject, but not in its outer appearance; his gaze was always penetrating beneath the surface and seeking its inner riches.

Hendrickje died in 1662, the exact date being unknown, and her death plunged Rembrandt into even greater loneliness, but as on the previous occasion sorrow seemed to open for him new realms of the spirit, this time the ultimate, deepest regions.

Twenty years before, in the year when Saskia died, Rembrandt had painted *The Nightwatch*, and now he painted another group, his last official work, *The Councillors of the Clothworkers*. In this painting were represented five councillors of the Amsterdam Clothworkers' Guild, sitting around a table with a servant in the background. The objective arrangement and simple construction exemplify the painter's development towards the spiritual and the static. The physical occasion is mirrored only on the men's faces. This work represents the ultimate climax of group painting.

In his last years Rembrandt gave himself up entirely to artistic visions and with his wisdom he acknowledged only one aim — to portray the higher life, the hidden, spiritual existence. His characters are admittedly earthly, but the stillness in which they are wrapped robs them of their mortality.

Extraneous difficulties kept Titus away from his father insofar as was possible, but he main-



ABRAHAM
AND ISAAC
Engraving, 1645
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam

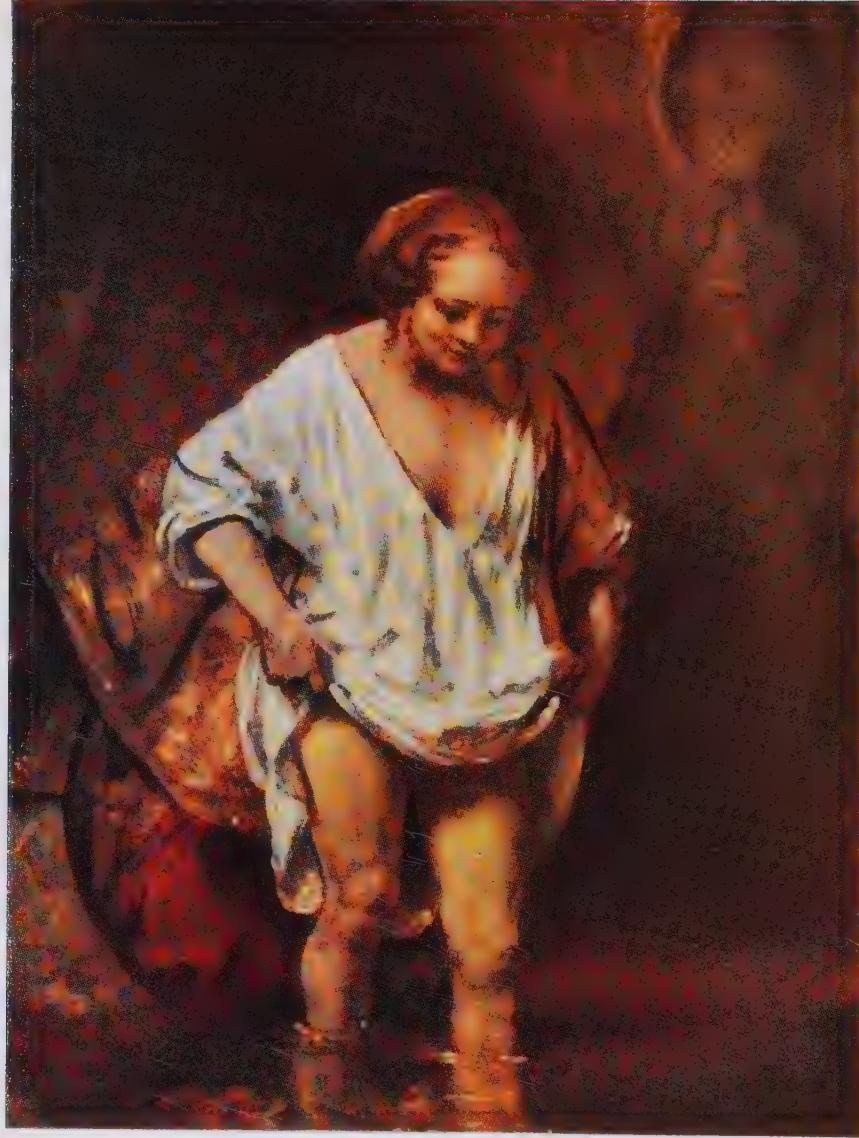


Siemsejan.

PORTRAIT
OF HENDRICKJE
STOFFELS
AS FLORA
Oil on Canvas
c. 1653
Metropolitan
Museum
New York



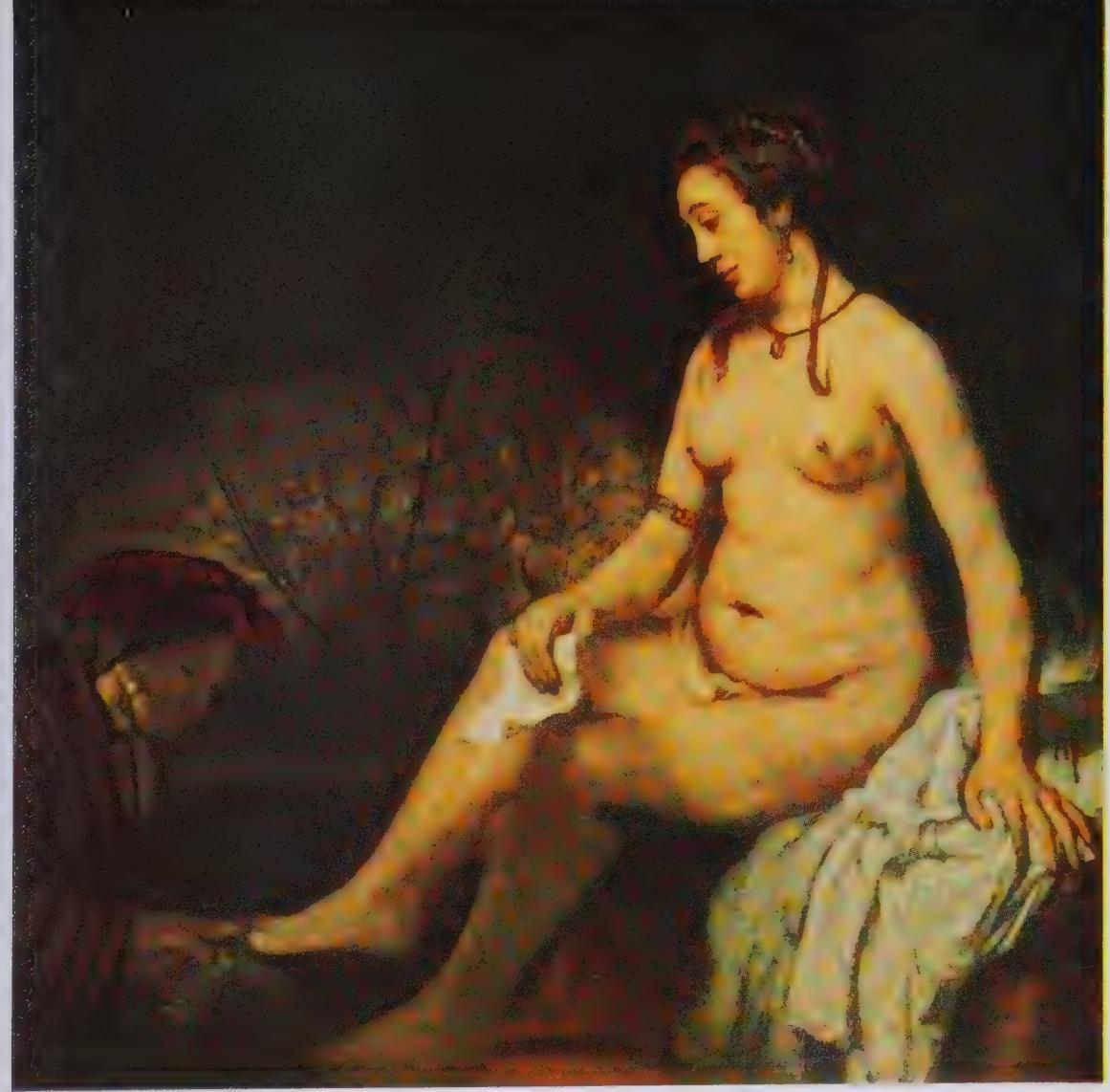




WOMAN BATHING
Oil on Wood
1654
National Gallery
London



BATHSHEBA
Oil on Canvas
1654
Louvre Museum
Paris





POLISH HORSEMAN. Oil on Canvas. c. 1655
Frick Museum, New York

►
SKELETON MAN ON SKELETON HORSE
Drawing. 1655



ANDREAS



Hector von Braun von

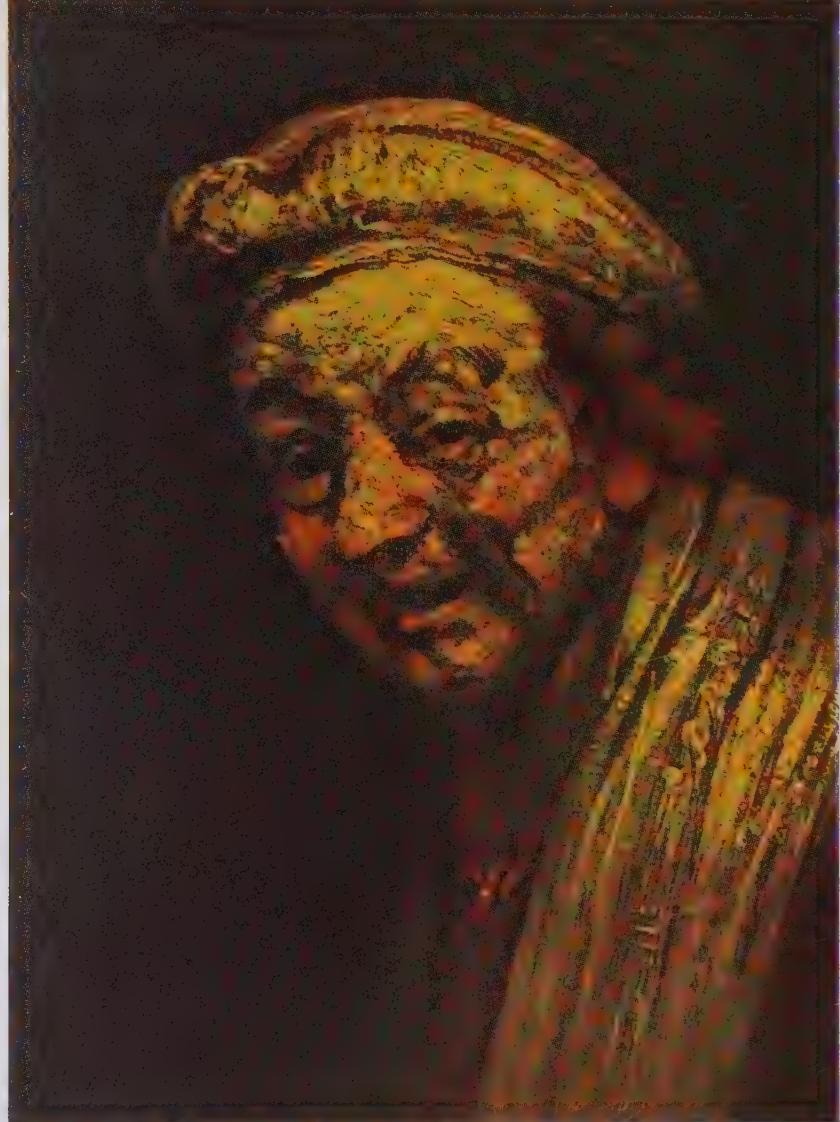
COPY
OF AN ITALIAN
COIN WITH HEAD
OF ANDREA DORIA
Designed
by Rembrandt
1655
△



▷
CLEMENT
DE JONGHE
Engraving. 1651
Rijksmuseum
Amsterdam



OMVAL
ON THE AMSTEL
RIVER
Engraving. 1645

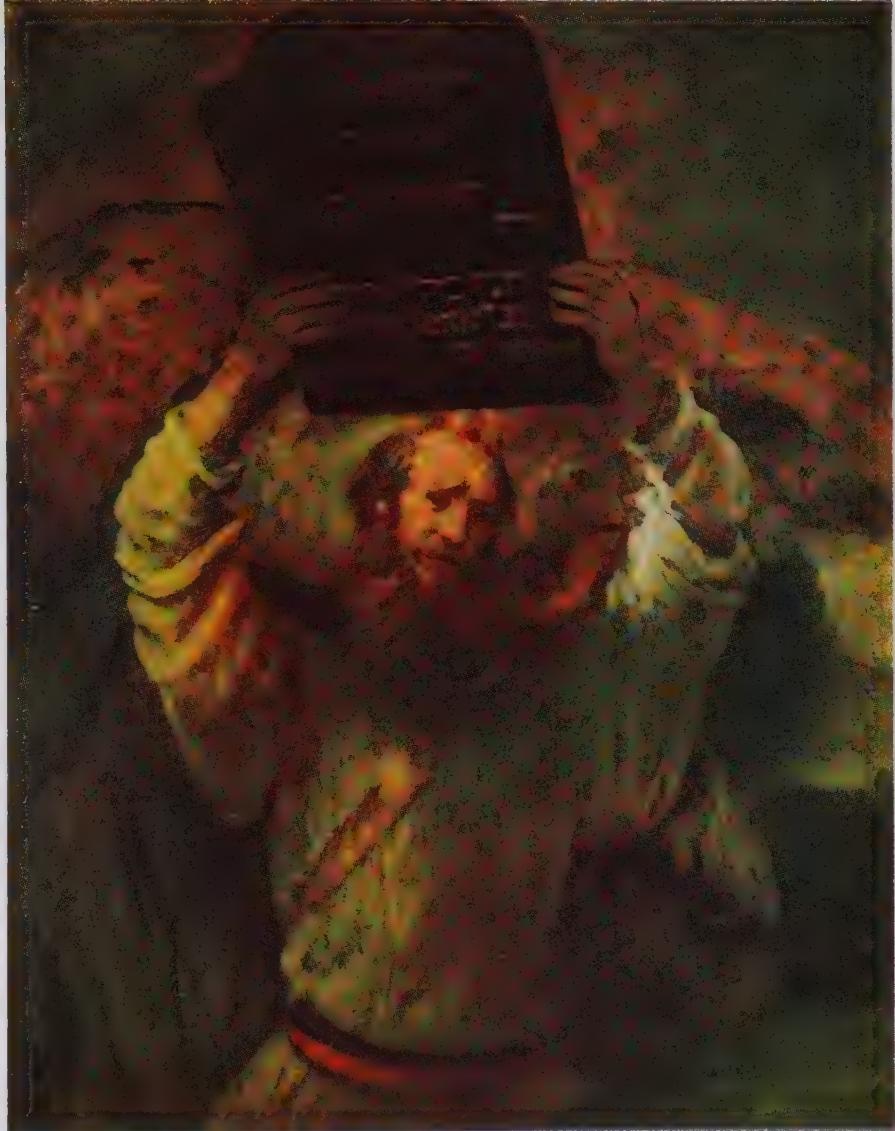


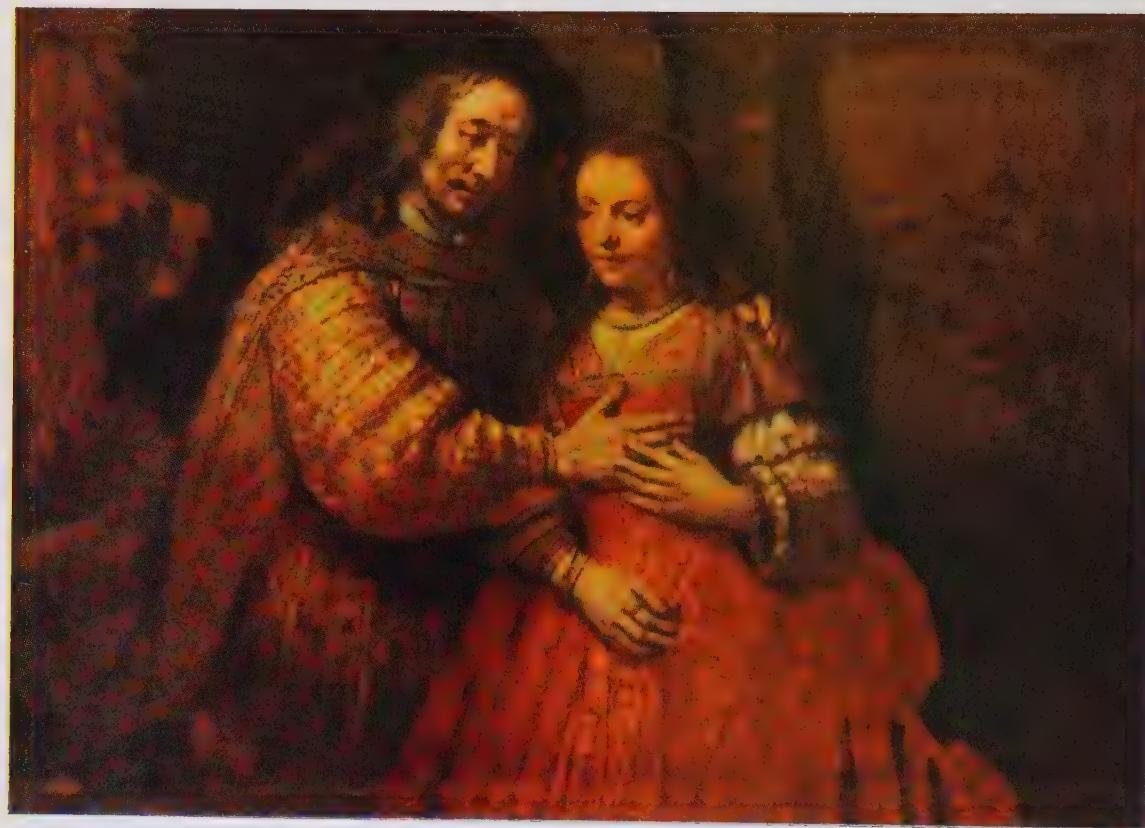
SELF-PORTRAIT
Oil on Canvas
c. 1665
Art Museum
Cologne



JACOB BLESSING HIS DESCENDANTS. 1656
Picture Gallery, Kassel

MOSES DESTROYING
THE TABLES
OF THE LAW
1659
New State Gallery
Berlin





THE JEWISH FIANCÉE. Oil on Canvas. c. 1666
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

tained the artist's household, in which Cornelia also lived. In 1668 he married Magdalena van Loo, the daughter of a silversmith, but still did not neglect his father. In the same year, however, Titus died, and the following March his daughter Titia was born, Rembrandt standing godfather at her christening.

In complete solitude the old man lived on with Cornelia and an old servant in the empty, desolate house. He died on 4th October, 1669, and was buried in the Westerkerk in

JUPITER AND ANTIOME. Engraving. 1659. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



Amsterdam on 8th October. Hendrickje, who had originally been denied Christian burial, now lies there too.

Rembrandt's possessions at the time of his death numbered little more than his painting equipment, a bed with blankets, some clothes, a few handkerchiefs, caps and a Bible. He has however left us an unparalleled output of about 700 paintings, 300 etchings and 1,800 drawings. He stares down at us from more than 100 self-portraits, for he used his own face for profound studies in expression and penetrating observation as no other painter has done. From the wide range of self-portraits we can trace his development from a virtuoso craftsman to the greatest portrayer of the spiritual in human nature, and the perfecter of northern art. Rembrandt has brought the invisible before our eyes and the incomprehensible within our grasp — he was one of the most powerful personalities in the whole history of western culture.

VIEW OF AMSTERDAM FROM THE WEST. Detail. Drawing. 1640



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rembrandt

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